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ABSTRACT

The feelings and perceptions of adolescents, apart from objective indices, warrent attention from those who are concerned with adolescent development and psychological stress. There is a need for a reliable baseline measure of adolescent subjective well-being, as manifested by self-reports of life satisfaction, to which future measurements can be compared. A newly-devised instrument, the Life Satisfaction Chart, was completed by high school students (N=916) who indicated their satisfaction with life in general, family life, friends and social life, and student life. An additional questionnaire explored the areas of age, sex, happiness, health, parent-child relationships, and self-competency. Subjects viewed their own lives as less satisfactory than the lives of other average adolescents. The mean level of satisfaction for white females was significantly lower than the levels for white males, black males, and black females. Satisfaction with family life was the most powerful domain affecting overall life satisfaction, followed by satisfaction with friends and social life, and feelings about one's accomplishments in life. (NRB)

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Life Satisfaction of Adolescents[1]

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Problem

The importance of people's satisfaction with the quality of their lives -- their feelings of subjective well-being -- is becoming increasingly evident to social scientists, policy planners, and, indeed, all concerned with human welfare. Research has been conducted among children ages 7 - 11 (Zill, 1977), adults (Back & Bourque, 1970; Campbell et al., 1976; Andrews & Withey, 1976), and the aged (Neugarten et al., 1961). The lack of attention paid to adolescents is especially surprising considering the theoretical and applied significance of the issue. The controversy regarding adolescence as a period of storm and stress would benefit from an examination of adolescents' reports of subjective well-being. The feelings and perceptions of adolescents, apart from "objective" indices of the quality of their lives, warrant attention from those who seek to understand the nature of development and prevent or ameliorate psychological distress (Rutter et al., 1976).

Objectives

The present study was designed to: (1) establish a reliable baseline measure of adolescent subjective well-being, as manifested by adolescents' reports of current life satisfaction, against which future measurements could be compared, and, (2) determine the relative and absolute saliency of several theoretically relevant domains of the adolescent experience (e.g., family, peers, school, personal competency) as well as the effects of age, sex, and ethnic status.

Method

Subjects. A stratified, cluster sampling of classes (grades 9 - 12) in the two senior high schools of a medium-sized (pop. 85,000), mid-Western industrial city yielded a sample of 482 females and 434 males, ages 14 to 18. The 418 who identified themselves as white and the 420 who identified themselves as black constituted the sample upon which the analyses were based. The two high schools were integrated by court-ordered bussing in 1971. At the time the study was conducted (spring, 1977), there was an equal percentage of black and white students in the high schools.

Measures & Procedures. A newly-devised Life Satisfaction Chart and an accompanying questionnaire were administered to students during class sessions. The Life Satisfaction Chart (see appendix), similar to Cantril's (1965) self-anchoring Ladder of Aspiration, consists of a separate "thermometer" for each age from 10 to 20, marked in graduated units from zero ("Life at its very worst, as you see it") to 100 ("Life at its very best, as you see it"). Students indicated their own level of overall life satisfaction (L.S.) currently and at the other 10 ages, as well as that of the average person of the same sex and age. (The present paper will deal only with current levels of satisfaction.) In addition, students indicated their current level of satisfaction with: (1) family life; (2) friends and social life; and (3) life as a student. An accompanying questionnaire elicited responses to questions regarding age, sex, "happiness" (Gurin et al., 1960), health, maturational status (Weatherley, 1964), attractiveness, relationship with mother, and, separately, with father, educational status of the parents, the student's own educational aspiration,

two questions from Andrews & Withey's (1974) Index of Personal Competence, one involving how they feel about the way they handle problems and the other their feeling about what they are accomplishing in life. The last question sought to determine sources of help utilized by the student in dealing with personal problems.

Reliability. A six-week test-retest reliability study (Torgoff, 1979), conducted with a comparable sample of 96 high school students, yielded reliability coefficients of .45 for overall current life satisfaction, .7 for satisfaction with family life, and .5 for happiness as well as satisfaction with friends & with school life. These reliability coefficients compare favorably with those obtained by others in studies of life satisfaction of adults.

Results & Discussion

The mean life satisfaction score is fairly high (76.6) and the distribution is negatively skewed (see table 2). It is difficult, however, to attribute precise meaning to the absolute level of the score itself. There are no existing benchmarks with which to compare our findings with those from other groups of adolescents, at prior historical periods, or in other settings. We do have available, however, 2 sets of information which can help us interpret the life satisfaction scores. The first concerns the extent to which the adolescents we tested viewed their level of satisfaction as being quantitatively different from that of an average adolescent of the same age and sex -- we have termed this "relative satisfaction." The second set of information consists of their

responses to the widely-used measure of "happiness" (Gurin et al., 1960). In regard to relative satisfaction, our subjects, to a slight, but statistically significant extent (correlated $t = -2.03$, d.f. = 813, $p < .05$) viewed their own life satisfaction as less than that of the average adolescent. 42% of our adolescent sample saw themselves as worse off than the average adolescent. This is in contrast to the findings obtained by Andrews & Withey (1976) with adult subjects, only 13% of whom perceived themselves as being worse off than the typical American. When we shift our view to the happiness question, to which our subjects responded by indicating whether they were: "not too happy," "pretty happy" or "very happy," we again find that the adolescents we studied reported a lower level of subjective well-being than that reported in the literature for adults. Campbell et al. (1976, p. 25), in reviewing national studies of adults, observed that a re-occurring finding was that "rather few people choose to describe themselves as 'not too happy'" -- usually only 10 to 15% are willing to confess to that much unhappiness. The fact that 24% of the adolescents in our study reported being at the lowest end of the happiness measure ("not too happy") warrants further attention. (66% reported being "pretty happy" and 10% "very happy.")

Turning now to the issue of variation in the level of satisfaction, two major sources of individual difference will be examined: (1) the demographic status of the adolescent, and (2) the potency of different life-space domains.

Life satisfaction scores were analyzed as a function of sex, ethnicity, and age -- using a 2 by 2 by 5 analysis of variance. The results reveal no

significant impact of age in the span studied (CA 14 to 18) either alone or in combination with sex and/or ethnicity. The results of particular interest are the significant ($p < .02$) interaction of sex by ethnicity, the significant main effect for sex, and the lack of a significant main effect for ethnicity. The mean levels of satisfaction of black males, black females, and white males are practically identical (77.8, 77.6, 79.3, respectively), while that for white females is significantly lower (72.3).

The meaning of these findings in regard to the nature of sex and ethnic differences in subjective well-being is, however, complicated by the responses to the "happiness" question. Chi-square analyses reveal that to a significant extent ($X^2 = 13.6$, d.f. = 6, $p < .03$) it was the black female, not the less satisfied white female, who was most likely to report being "not too happy" (31%) and least likely (7%) to report being "very happy."

Clearly, these results suggest that the happiness measure and our measure of life satisfaction are tapping different aspects of subjective well-being. It would seem to be of value, therefore if future research in the area of subjective well-being made use of both happiness and satisfaction measures. The results may be more difficult to interpret, but they would portray a more realistic picture of the complexity of the issues. To omit one of the measures, risks presentation of an incomplete and, perhaps, distorted view.

The next major issue concerns the domains that appreciably account for variance in adolescent life satisfaction (see table 3). A step-wise multiple regression ($R = .65$) revealed that the major contributor, the

most powerful domain affecting overall life satisfaction, is the adolescent's satisfaction with family life. Of the total 42% of the variance accounted for, 28% is contributed by the family domain. The next most powerful area affecting overall life satisfaction is the satisfaction the adolescent derived from friends and social life -- this accounted for 8% of the variance. The third most powerful variable is the adolescent's feeling about what he or she was accomplishing in life. This accounted for 5% of additional variance. Other factors, such as age, sex, ethnicity, and satisfaction with school life did not contribute appreciable additional variance.

When multiple regressions were examined separately for the four sex by ethnic subgroups (white females, white males, black females & black males), an intriguing picture emerged. First, we note that more of the variance of life satisfaction of whites was accounted for than of blacks, and more of females than males. Second, the potency of particular domains in accounting for variance in satisfaction differs appreciably from group to group. In this regard, we observe that while the family domain is the primary domain of white males, white females, and black females (accounting for 32 - 33% of the variance), the situation is quite different for black males. For black males, the family provided only 4% of the variance, while the primary source of variance for this group is that of friends and social life (21% of the variance). This does not mean that black males did not find satisfaction in the family -- indeed, their level of satisfaction with family life was the highest of the four groups (83.1). It does mean, however, that the relatively high degree of satisfaction the black male derived from the family was not as potent a contributer to his

overall life satisfaction as it was for the other groups.
Finally, we note the sex difference regarding competency -- as measured by the adolescent's feeling toward life accomplishments. Competency was a more potent factor for males (accounting for 10% of the variance in life satisfaction) than it was for females (2% of the variance).

In summary, if reports of subjective well-being may taken as an index of storm and stress, our results provide good news and bad news regarding the state of well-being among adolescents. On the one hand, we find that 76% of our subjects report being either "pretty happy" or "very happy." On the other hand, the fact that 24% of our subjects report being "not too happy" is a matter of some concern, considering that only 10-15% of adults report that low a level of happiness. Whether or not the lives of adolescents actually are more stressful than those of adults, the fact that adolescents <u>experience</u> their lives as less satisfying should be a matter of theoretical and applied concern.

As is often true with complex data sets, answers rapidly convert into further questions. So, we conclude with questions to which we, and hopefully others, will seek answers. First, given that we were able to account for 51% of the variance of the life satisfaction of white females, why is it that we were able to account for only 35% of that of black males? Second, what is it in the life space of adolescent black males that accounts for the low saliency of the family for overall life satisfaction? What are its developmental antecedents?
Similarly, what in the life space of black females and white males accounts for the relatively low saliency of friends as sources of life satisfaction?
Finally, we ask with some distress, why the adolescent females in our

sample, in 1977, still give such diminished weight to their feelings about their accomplishments, and, more importantly, what can be done to change that situation?

In this study, we are asking you and many other high school students how you view your lives. The questions are about feelings of satisfaction with life, happiness, and the kinds of situations that concern students. We hope to learn more about the problems of students and school life.

This is not a test and you will not be graded. Please do not sign your name. No one in your school or anywhere else will know which is your questionnaire. While we hope you will help us by answering these questions, your participation is voluntary.

You are the expert on the needs of students. Please share that knowledge with us.

LIFE SATISFACTION CHART

Think for a minute about how your life has been--its good times and bad times, its ups and downs, and its in-betweens. On the chart you will be able to show how satisfied you have been with your life at different ages up to the present --and what you think the future will be like.

Each column in the chart stands for a year of your life, from age 10 to 20. On the side of each column are numbers which mark off amount of life satisfaction from 0 to 100. ZERO STANDS FOR LIFE AT ITS VERY WORST, AS YOU SEE IT. 100 STANDS FOR LIFE AT ITS VERY BEST, AS YOU SEE IT.

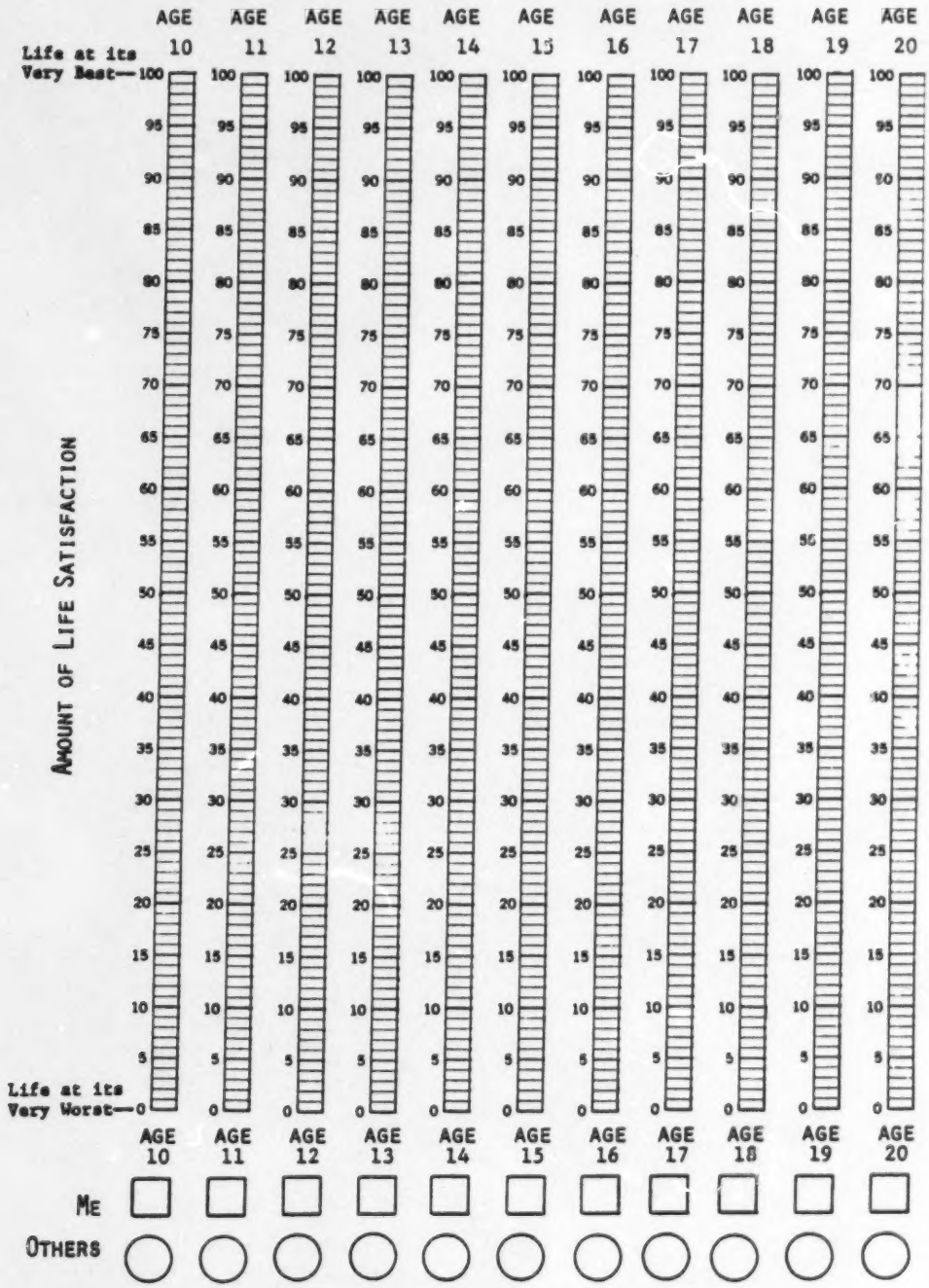
1. At the top of the chart, write down your age.
2. Draw a circle around that number on top of the column for your age.
3. In the column for your present age, color in red the line that shows how satisfied you are now with your life.
4. In the box labelled "Me" at the bottom of the column, write in red the number of the line you marked.
5. Now mark in red the other 10 columns in the same way--showing how satisfied you were or expect to be with your life at that age.
6. Check to be sure that there is a number in the box at the bottom of each column, and that the number is the same as the number of the line you marked in red.

Now, in the same way you thought about how satisfied you were or expect to be with your life, think about how satisfying life is for most people of your sex at each age.

7. Starting at the column for age 10, mark with the black pencil the line that shows how satisfying life is for most people of your sex at that age.
8. In the circle labelled "Others" at the bottom of the column, write in the number of the line you marked in black.
9. Now mark in black the other 10 columns, in the same way--showing how satisfying life is for most people of your sex at that age.
10. Check to be sure that there is a number in the circle at the bottom of each column and that the number is the same as the number of the line you marked in black.
11. Now, look at the 4 boxes at the bottom of the chart. They are for 4 different parts of your life. Think about how satisfying these different parts of your life are at the present time. Write in a number, from 0 to 100, which best describes your present level of satisfaction with:
    1. your home and family life;
    2. your friends and social life;
    3. you life as a student; and, if you now have a job,
    4. your work life.

Your age: _____

Life Satisfaction Chart



How satisfied are you with:

1) your home & family life ☐

2) your friends & social life ☐

3) your life as a student ☐

4) your work life ☐

Torgoff 1/77

Here are some questions which will help us better understand how high school students view their lives. Check (✓) the one answer that tells best what YOU think.

1. Taken altogether, how would you say things are these days? Would say they were

   _____ 1. not too happy
   _____ 2. pretty happy
   _____ 3. very happy

2. How has your health been over the last year or so? Would you say you've been in

   _____ 1. very bad health
   _____ 2. bad health
   _____ 3. O.K. health
   _____ 4. good health
   _____ 5. very good health

3. With regard to your physical development, would say your development is

   _____ 1. very early
   _____ 2. somewhat early
   _____ 3. average
   _____ 4. somewhat late
   _____ 5. very late

4. How attractive are you compared with others of your age?

   _____ 1. much less attractive
   _____ 2. somewhat less attractive
   _____ 3. about the same
   _____ 4. somewhat more attractive
   _____ 5. much more attractive

5. How well are you getting along with your mother?

   _____ 1. terrible
   _____ 2. not well
   _____ 3. O. K.
   _____ 4. well
   _____ 5. very well
   _____ 0. can't say--mother not alive or not living with me

6. How well are you getting along with your father?

   _____ 1. terrible
   _____ 2. not well
   _____ 3. O. K.
   _____ 4. well
   _____ 5. very well
   _____ 0. can't say--father not alive or not living with me

7. What is the highest grade in school that your mother finished?

   _____ 1. less than 8th grade
   _____ 2. finished 8th grade
   _____ 3. some high school
   _____ 4. high school graduate
   _____ 5. some college
   _____ 6. college graduate

8. What is the highest grade in school that your father finished?

   _____ 1. less than 8th grade
   _____ 2. finished 8th grade
   _____ 3. some high school
   _____ 4. high school graduate
   _____ 5. some college
   _____ 6. college graduate

9. How far do you plan to go in school?

   _____ 1. less than high school graduation
   _____ 2. graduate from high school and not go on
   _____ 3. graduate, go on to a vocational, technical or business school
   _____ 4. go to a junior college
   _____ 5. go to a 4-year college
   _____ 6. go to a graduate or professional school after college

10. How do you feel about the way you handle the problems that come up in your life?

    _____ 1. terrible
    _____ 2. not good
    _____ 3. O. K.
    _____ 4. good
    _____ 5. very good

11. How do you feel about what you are accomplishing in your life?

    _____ 1. terrible
    _____ 2. not good
    _____ 3. O. K.
    _____ 4. good
    _____ 5. very good

12. When you have a personal problem that is really troubling you, what would you most likely do?

    _____ 1. There is no one I can talk to.
    _____ 2. I usually prefer to work things out myself.
    _____ 3. I have a friend or relative I can talk things over with.

Reference Notes

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Table 1

Life Satisfaction (L. S.) as a Function of Questionnaire Variables

Questionnaire variables	F**	p	r	Mean L. S. for Values of Questionnaire Variables: Values 1	2	3	4	5	6/0
1. Happiness*	67.4	.0000	.38	64.	79.	89.			
2. Health	6.3	.0000	.16	77.	65.	72.	77.	81.	
3. Maturation	< 1.	--	ns	75.	77.	77.	75.	65.	
4. Attractiveness	15.2	.0000	.19	55.	65.	78.	79.	80.	
5. Mother-relations w.	33.8	.0000	.37	51.	66.	69.	79.	82.	/77.
6. Father-relations w.	18.0	.0000	.30	58.	66.	75.	78.	81.	/76.
7. Mother-education	5.6	.0004	.09	60.	79.	73.	79.	76.	78./
8. Father-education	5.5	.0001	.16	67.	71.	74.	79.	78.	80./
9. Educ. aspirations	4.2	.001	.11	56.	71.	77.	79.	79.	77./
10. Handle problems	21.3	.0000	.28	60.	62.	74.	81.	81.	
11. Accomplishments	57.0	.0000	.45	43.	60.	73.	82.	86.	
12. Social supports	14.6	.0000	.12	61.	77.	78.			
Age (value 1=14, 5=18)	1.0	--	.05	74.	76.	77.	79.	76.	
Sex (value 1=female, 2=male)	8.2	.004		75.	79.				
Ethnic (value 1=black, 2=white)	3.1	.08		78.	75.				

*The percentages of S's for values 1, 2, and 3 of the "happiness" variable are 24%, 66%, and 10%, respectively.

**F based on 1-way analyses of variance of Life Satisfaction with questionnaire variables. N's for analyses with the 12 variables varied from 673 to 825.

Table 2

Multiple-Regression Analyses for Prediction of Life Satisfaction (L. S.)

Total Group, Sex X Ethnic Breakdowns, and Age Breakdowns

Predictor variables	Total	Males		Females		C. A.				
		White	Black	White	Black	14	15	16	17	18
	Beta Weights									
	R^2 Change									
Sat. with family	.31	.31		.31	.39	.34	.26	.25	.40	.24
	.28	*.32*	*.04*	*.32*	*.33*	*.38*	*.26*	*.24*	*.38*	*.20*
Sat. with friends	.25	.21	.28	.25	.20	.30	.26	.21	.31	.27
	.08	*.04*	*.21*	*.10*	*.03*	*.04*	*.05*	*.08*	*.10*	*.08*
Sat. with school	.10	.11	.15	.21	-.04	--	.13	.16	.03	.11
	.01	*.01*	*.01*	*.06*	--	--	*.01*	*.02*	--	*.01*
Educ. aspiration	.01	-.03	-.02	.04	.04	.12	-.04	-.06	.10	-.04
	--	--	--	--	--	*.02*	--	--	*.01*	--
Handle problems	.01	.03	-.04	.10	-.01	-.06	-.05	.19	-.04	--
	--	--	--	*.01*	--	--	--	*.04*	--	--
Accomplishments	.22	.30	.24	.12	.20	.31	.27	.11	.17	.24
	.05	*.10*	*.09*	*.02*	*.02*	*.09*	*.08*	*.01*	*.02*	*.05*
Age	.09	.06	.05	.09	.15					
	.01	--	--	*.01*	*.02*					
N	808	189	197	215	204	115	258	246	181	87
Multiple R	.65	.69	.59	.72	.64	.73	.64	.63	.72	.59
R^2	.42	.47	.35	.51	.40	.53	.41	.40	.52	.34
	Means									
L. S.*	76.64	79.32	77.77	72.28	77.60	73.75	75.47	77.69	78.14	76.98
Sat. with family	78.20	79.59	83.11	70.28	80.49	76.12	80.14	78.26	75.08	76.14
Sat. with friends	81.10	83.43	82.76	78.94	79.54	82.17	83.00	80.65	79.65	77.84
Sat. with school	70.91	66.75	73.46	68.03	75.46	71.24	72.45	70.11	70.45	69.22
Educ. aspiration	4.05	3.72	4.28	3.80	4.38	3.86	4.21	3.98	3.96	3.99
Handle problems	3.58	3.68	3.73	3.47	3.45	3.44	3.43	3.65	3.65	3.70
Accomplishments	3.62	3.68	3.72	3.47	3.61	3.65	3.66	3.61	3.46	3.69
	Correlations with Life Satisfaction									
Sat. with family	.53	.56	.39	.56	.57	.62	.51	.49	.62	.37
Sat. with friends	.46	.47	.45	.49	.41	.53	.47	.43	.52	.45
Sat. with school	.37	.35	.41	.51	.21	.27	.36	.39	.44	.36
Educ. aspiration	.12	.16	.04	.20	.06	.20	.07	-.01	.28	.15
Handle problems	.28	.39	.12	.40	.22	.21	.25	.41	.21	.18
Accomplishments	.45	.54	.42	.44	.41	.48	.47	.38	.50	.43
Age	.05	-.07	-.02	.11	.14					

*The S.D., kurtosis, and skewness for the Life Satisfaction scores of the total group are 19.94, 1.67, and -1.23, respectively

TABLE 3

PERCENTAGE OF LIFE SATISFACTION VARIANCE ACCOUNTED FOR AS A FUNCTION OF MAJOR DOMAINS & SEX-ETHNIC STATUS